

# Digital Multimodal Composition in the Second-Language Classroom

**In a Facebook group I have been moderating, English language teachers from around the world have pointed out that there is a disconnect between the kinds of texts students read and write outside of class and the texts they read and write in class. They reported that outside of class time, students are often glued to devices such as mobile phones and tablets, but at school, those devices are often put away (sometimes even banned); reading and writing activities focus on passages from textbooks and traditional print-based texts, and the use of technology in composition is often ignored. Lotherington and Jenson (2011) echo this point, arguing that in L2 classes, traditional print-based text continues to dominate writing instruction.**

In many contexts, standardized assessments exert a significant amount of pressure on the ways in which writing instruction is carried out in schools. Writing in schools is still often restricted to traditional print-based text because that is what is assessed (Choi and Yi 2016; Herrington and Moran 2009; Lee 2010, 2016). Intertwined with the washback (the influence of assessment on instruction) that assessment can have on instruction are teachers' beliefs about literacy. English language teachers are often reluctant to embrace any kind of composition beyond traditional print-based texts because of ideas that literacy is primarily language-based (Choi and Yi 2016; Hundley and Holbrook 2013; Tan, Bopry, and Guo 2010; Valdés 2004).

## DIGITAL LITERACIES

*Digital literacies* are ways of reading and writing carried out through digital devices

and on the Internet (Ware, Kern, and Warschauer 2016). They are also called twenty-first-century literacies, multiliteracies, new literacies, and new media literacies (Kist 2013). Examples include, but are not limited to, blogs, social media sites, websites, podcasts, infographics, and digital posters. While digital literacies often play an important role in how we communicate in today's world, successfully navigating digital literacies is often given little attention in today's schools (Elola and Oskoz 2017; Hafner, Chik, and Jones 2015; Jiang 2017; Kist 2013; Lee 2016; Lotherington and Jenson 2011) in spite of recent calls for educators and administrators to rethink ideas about meaning making and communication in the digital age (Cummings 2009; Hafner, Chik, and Jones 2015; Jewitt and Kress 2003; Kress 2000; New London Group 1996). Digital modes of writing need to be practiced in the English

language classroom to better align with the kinds of writing carried out outside a school setting (Elola and Oskoz 2017; Hafner 2014; Serafini 2014).

There are numerous components of digital literacy skills; one important aspect is the ability to create digital multimodal compositions, which is the focus of this article. The article begins with a definition of digital multimodal composition (henceforth DMC). It then explores the benefits of incorporating DMC in the English language classroom. The subsequent section covers important considerations for teachers before they start a digital multimodal project or task. The article then provides suggestions for five classroom applications of DMCs. Finally, the article touches on assessment for DMC.

### **WHAT IS DIGITAL MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION (DMC)?**

According to Serafini (2014, 12), “... a *mode* is a system of visual and verbal entities created within or across various cultures to represent and express meanings.” Examples of modes are written language, images (moving or still), and sound. The New London Group (1996), a group of scholars credited with bringing attention to the need for new perspectives on composition, pointed out that ideas of literacy can no longer be restricted to traditional print-based text; therefore, students should be able to demonstrate their writing competencies through writing that makes use of multiple modes and various technologies. The prefix “multi” might be confusing, as it implies a number of modes. However, since DMC is composition that uses more than one mode and is produced and distributed digitally (Palmeri 2012), a multimodal composition might, in fact, have only two modes. For example, a blog with a visual is multimodal; a podcast with sounds is multimodal; a poster with words and pictures is multimodal; and a research paper with graphs is multimodal. When working with DMCs, the writer needs to consider how the modes work together to convey a message (Sabatino 2019; Shipka 2013).

It is important not to think of DMC in opposition to academic writing. Academic writing can be realized through traditional print text as well as digital text, which may or may not be multimodal, just as nonacademic writing can be carried out through traditional, print-based text or digitally, and may or may not be multimodal. Imagine, for instance, that a student writes an essay on a piece of paper for a school assignment. This essay has only print text (whether it is handwritten or typed). We would consider this a traditional, print-based text. Now, imagine that this student adds a picture to this text. The text is now multimodal. If the student were to take the same essay and produce and distribute it digitally (with the picture), it would then be a DMC. It is the type of text, the purpose for which it is written, and the language that is used that make a text academic or nonacademic. The number of modes and whether the text was produced digitally do not have any bearing on whether a text is academic or nonacademic. In brief, a DMC can be academic or nonacademic.

### **DMC IN L2 CLASSROOMS**

My personal experience noted in the introduction offers only anecdotal evidence that might not fully represent the degree to which DMC is carried out in L2 English language classrooms. However, in a survey of research on English as a foreign language (EFL) writing in schools to date, Lee (2016) noted that, because of a lack of research, little is known about the degree to which K–12 English language teachers in EFL settings employ DMC. In higher-education contexts, there has been some research on DMC in EFL contexts (e.g., Hafner 2014, 2015; Hafner, Chik, and Jones 2015; Hafner and Ho 2020; Jiang 2017; Kim and Lee 2018; Yang 2012). Studies on DMC have also been carried out in English as a second language (ESL) K–12 contexts (e.g., Ajayi 2008; Choi and Yi 2016; Early and Marshall 2008); ESL adult-education contexts (e.g., Tan and McWilliam 2009); and ESL higher-education contexts (e.g., Cimasko and Shin 2017; Dzekoe 2013; Shin and Cimasko 2008). However,

these studies have been carried out only in certain regions of the world, and many were primarily or entirely qualitative in nature. While existing studies provide rich details on the nature of DMC in particular contexts, it is impossible to generalize these findings to a larger population. In other words, studies on DMC in some classrooms do not provide evidence of the degree to which DMC is incorporated in L2 English language classrooms globally. In essence, the application of DMC in many L2 writing classes in both EFL and ESL contexts likely remains limited (Early, Kendrick, and Potts 2015; Jiang 2017).

### **WHY DMCs SHOULD BE INCORPORATED INTO THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Traditional print-based assignments are still an important part of writing and literacy. Students need to know how to write clear sentences, how to connect sentences into a longer piece of writing, and how to build arguments—all of which can be learned through traditional, school-based writing assignments. But there is also the world of digital writing, much of which has become increasingly multimodal (Brooke 2014), that students need to be versed in to become savvy consumers and effective communicators (Gee 2014; Serafini 2014). Jiang's (2017) study suggests that language learned through DMC can be linked to the development of traditional, print-based literacy. DMC not only helps students develop composition skills, but also helps them develop digital literacy skills, an important part of twenty-first-century learning (Parris, Estrada, and Honigsfeld 2017). Bohannon's (2015) study found that 14 out of 15 students surveyed indicated they had developed digital literacy skills through DMCs. DMC can help develop composition and digital literacy skills while also providing students with opportunities to integrate the multiple language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Lee 2016; Nation and Macalister 2021; Parris, Estrada, and Honigsfeld 2017), which can reinforce and solidify language learning.

In addition to the real-life practicalities of being able to compose in a digital world,

DMC can be motivational for students in ways that traditional, print-based texts might not be. Bohannon (2015) found that 14 out of 15 students surveyed felt that DMCs were more motivational than traditional print-based assignments. Similarly, in a study by Powell, Alexander, and Borton (2011), 60 percent of student participants reported high levels of motivation when carrying out multimodal projects. Choi and Yi (2016) found that students developed more confidence and self-esteem through multimodal projects. Kirchoff and Cook (2016) found that following a semester of multimodal writing assignments, students saw themselves as better writers.

To some degree, enhanced motivation might lie in the range of possibilities that DMC affords. DMC allows for a wide degree of creativity because it provides writers with a variety of tools and ways of expression as well as many opportunities for experimentation and innovation (Alexander, Powell, and Green 2011/2012; Brooke 2014; Hafner 2015; Hafner and Ho 2020; Lee 2016; Sheppard 2009). In addition to access to a variety of tools, DMC often gives students the opportunity to incorporate an interactional component (e.g., social media and blogs), which can help students understand how their composition is received. Hafner's (2014) study showed that students were more motivated to produce quality products when their assignments were published on online platforms. Kim and Lee (2018) similarly found that DMC helped students develop better audience awareness. (See "Talk about public and private writing" in the next section before asking students to post assignments publicly.) Many of your students might already be engaged in digital platforms and might do a lot of writing online (Stanley 2013). You can harness the experience and interest that already exist and use them to help students develop both composition and English language skills. The idea, however, is to use technology and DMC not just to attract students' attention, but rather as a real aspect of their literacy practices (Kist 2013; Parris, Estrada, and Honigsfeld 2017; Stanley 2013).

## BEFORE STARTING A DIGITAL MULTIMODAL PROJECT

### Talk about public and private writing

An important part of digital literacy is understanding the differences between public and private writing (Bloch 2008; Harmer 2015; Ivester 2011). Careers, reputations, and lives have been ruined by information that has been made public on the Internet (Ivester 2011). As teachers, we must respect and protect our students' privacy and prevent any future loss of reputation (Harmer 2015). Before your students post anything online for a class assignment, have a discussion with them about the difference between public and private writing. Talk with them about what happens when private information is made public and the kinds of information they want to share about themselves online (Blyth 2011). It is especially important to be cautious with young learners who might have more difficulty distinguishing between public and private writing (Bloch 2008).

Students should never be forced into making their school writing assignments public. Some learners might not feel ready to share their writing publicly; some learners might write about topics that they do not want to share broadly; and some students might be members of vulnerable populations. Give your learners options for how they publish their work. You can set up shared platforms or sites that are shared only with students in the class, or you can let students decide whether they want to make their writing public. With most learning management systems, for instance, student work can be shared with other classmates or only with the instructor. On most blogging platforms, students can choose to make their posts public or visible only to select others, such as classmates and the teacher.

### Make sure students will be able to carry out the assignment

Before starting a digital multimodal assignment, find out about your students' access to technology and their knowledge of and experience with technology tools. You can ask your students directly, or you can

give them a written survey. You might want to conduct a general survey of technology skills, or you might want to ask your students particular questions related to an upcoming project. (For a sample general survey of technology, see Table 1.)

If you are introducing a technology or a way of using a certain technology that students might not know, practice using that function of technology with students and provide assistance as needed. You could also direct students to online resources that can assist them in learning to use the technologies they might need. Additionally, you can ask students to help one another learn how to use the necessary technologies. Ask students to employ the *Each One, Teach One* method, in which those who learn then become those who teach.

### Consider the purpose and goals of your project

Like other writing assignments, DMCs can be carried out for various reasons.

The focus of some DMCs might be to help students practice using different modes in a composition to communicate a message. For other assignments, the purpose might be to reinforce recently learned grammar and vocabulary. Still another aim of DMCs might be on developing specific composition skills or to help students practice digital literacy skills. And, of course, many assignments will incorporate a combination of these goals and purposes. Writing down your objectives will help you to be clear about the purposes and intended outcomes for the DMC you assign, and that will, in turn, help you clarify your assessment plan. (See Table 2 for sample objectives of a DMC.)

### Plan the overall assignment

You can have students do stand-alone assignments, such as one podcast, or a series of assignments, such as a number of podcasts. These podcasts could have different content related to the same theme. For instance, students might carry out a series of podcasts related to environmental issues. You might also have students carry out a multigenre, digital

### Technology Survey

1. Which of the following tools do you have access to? (Check all that apply.)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shared computer                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Your own computer       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shared iPad or tablet                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Your own iPad or tablet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Access to a family member's cell phone | <input type="checkbox"/> Your own cell phone     |

2. Which of the following best describes your Internet access?

- ☐ Regularly available home Internet connection for one or more of the devices listed above
- ☐ Limited access to the Internet in shared space (such as a school, library, or Internet café)
- ☐ No reliable access to the Internet

3. How confident are you in your ability to carry out each of the following activities? (Check the best answer for each skill below.)

Skill	Very confident	Confident	Not so confident	Not confident at all
Typing on a keyboard				
Sending and receiving email				
Finding information and resources online				
Inserting pictures into a document				
Using Zoom				
Using Google Docs				

**Table 1. Sample general survey of technology**

(Note that Table 1 does not necessarily present a complete survey. It is meant to provide an idea of the kinds of questions that might be relevant in a technology survey.)

### Objectives

By carrying out this picture-story assignment, students will:

- Understand how words and images work together to create meaning
- Learn how to arrange words and images on a page
- Practice writing descriptions of people and places

**Table 2. Sample objectives of a DMC**

multimodal project whereby they put together a project that focuses on one topic that they explore through different genres. Suppose students choose to focus on pollution and create a podcast, blog, and poster. They could then put the different pieces of their project on a website. In this way, students get practice working with a variety of genres, including the construction of a website.

### SCAFFOLDING A DMC ASSIGNMENT

Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) recommend a three-phase model for helping students analyze and compose DMCs; their model is described here with some modifications:

1. In the first stage, *observation and collection*, learners consider their interests and collect a number of texts in the genre they plan to compose in. If learners will be writing blogs, for instance, they should look at blog entries. (Depending on your students' age and proficiency level, you may need to supply appropriate models at this stage or direct students to webpages where they can find suitable models.)
2. Once students have a collection of models, they move to the second stage, *guided exploration and analysis*. In this stage, learners analyze the models for lexical and grammatical features and consider the writer's target audience. (For a detailed treatment of ways to use models, see Sowell 2019.) Learners should also consider how the different parts of a DMC work together to convey a message. For instance, how does a picture support written language? How do sound effects support the spoken text in a podcast? (For each of the suggested compositions listed in the following section, there are sample questions that can be used for analysis.)
3. In the third stage, *creation and participation*, learners make their own compositions and reflect on how their texts were received.

### WAYS OF WORKING WITH DMCs

There are numerous DMCs that can be carried out in an English language classroom. This section focuses on five DMCs and possible assignments that can be implemented in the given genres. These assignments can be carried out in both online and face-to-face learning contexts.

#### DMC 1: Picture Stories

Picture stories are words and pictures used together.

**Purpose for use in the classroom:** Picture stories give students the opportunity to practice writing descriptions. (For a detailed account on teaching students to write descriptions of photos, see Chong 2017.)

#### Assignments:

1. *Describe a picture.* Ask students to describe a picture or pictures. You can give students specific assignments. If your class has been working on describing people, you can ask your students to post a photo of a friend or family member and write a description. Alternatively, you can give students the freedom to select the kinds of pictures they want to use for their picture stories.
2. *Describe a sequence of pictures.* Ask students to put pictures together in a sequence to tell a simple story. For example, students take pictures over the weekend, then write about their weekend activities in sequence: First, I \_\_\_\_\_. Then, I \_\_\_\_\_. After that, I \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Analysis questions:

- What is the purpose of this piece of writing?
- Who is the target audience?
- How do written text and picture(s) work together?



**Platforms and apps:** Some currently popular choices are Flickr (a site for posting photographs that allows users to annotate them), Facebook, ThingLink, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

#### **DMC 2: Blogs**

Blogs are online journals or informational websites.

**Purposes for use in the classroom:** Blogs provide students with writing practice and the opportunity to write within a community (Stanley 2013). One of the great features of blogs is that they provide a platform where students can easily read and respond to one another's posts at any time. Additionally, blogging platforms usually have features that allow users to incorporate other aspects of text, such as visuals, hyperlinks, videos, and sounds, which gives students the opportunity to experiment with different modes. (You could require that each blog entry students write include more than one mode.)

#### **Assignments:**

1. *Personal diary entries.* Blogs can be used as personal diary entries where students write about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This kind of blogging assignment should usually be shared only within the class, and students should be cautioned to share only what they are comfortable sharing with their classmates and instructor.
2. *Reflections.* Blogs can be used as a space for students to reflect on reading assignments and other class materials. (In some cases, students benefit from having a prompt or guiding question to respond to.)
3. *Specific topics.* Students can focus their blog entries on specific topics. These topics might directly relate to class instruction and could be assigned. Alternatively, students might choose a topic and write several blog posts about that topic throughout the course, or they might choose a different topic for each post.

4. *Making blogs interactive.* One way to make blogs interactive is to have students write a question at the end of their blog entry. Students can be assigned to read and respond to a number of classmates' entries for each assignment, or they might be assigned "web buddies" who will read and respond regularly to each other's blog entries (Bonk and Zhang 2008).

#### **Analysis questions:**

- What is the purpose of the blog post?
- Who is the target audience?
- How do different features of the post (visuals, written language, and hyperlinks) work together?

**Platforms and apps:** Common blogging platforms are Blogger (with Blogger, you can create closed groups), WordPress, and Wix.

#### **DMC 3: Posters**

Posters are visual representations of ideas, concepts, or other information.

#### **Purposes for use in the classroom:**

Posters are good for helping students explore ideas and solidify understanding. They allow students to be creative and practice using words and images to convey meaning.

#### **Assignments:**

1. *Presentations.* Posters are often used as a visual aid for presentations. Students are asked to create posters that they then present to the class. Posters can range from serving as a visual for topics such as "My likes" to representations of academic research.
2. *Review of key concepts.* Making posters can help students internalize and remember key concepts from a lesson. If, for instance, your lesson is on health, students can make posters that signify behavior and activities that are important for staying healthy. Students can be put

in groups and asked to focus on different aspects of the same topic. For instance, some students focus on eating healthy food; others focus on ways to lead an active lifestyle; and others focus on ways to prevent disease.

3. *Topics.* Students could be given a topic that they then research and create a poster on. For younger learners, instructors can give students sets of vocabulary items. Students then create posters with the new vocabulary and corresponding visual representations.
4. *Making posters interactive.* Following a poster presentation, the presenter invites classmates to ask questions related to the topic. Alternatively, students make posters that they stand beside but do not present on. Instead, they invite viewers to ask questions based on the information on the poster.

Posters can be made by individuals, pairs, or groups. Digital posters can be uploaded to a class website or another Internet location. (For a detailed explanation of a group poster activity, see Fishman 2019.)

#### Analysis questions:

- What is the purpose of the poster?
- Who is the target audience?
- Is the text large enough to read?
- Does the poster have a good balance of text and pictures?

**Platforms and apps:** Digital posters can be made in PowerPoint and in Canva and projected electronically or printed out and posted on a wall.

#### DMC 4: Podcasts

A podcast is a digital audio recording that includes speech and often other auditory elements such as noise, sound effects, and music.

**Purposes for use in the classroom:** In the classroom, podcasts can work well for informative texts, interviews, and personal narratives.

#### Assignments:

1. *Informative podcasts.* Students are given specific topics or choose their own topics for an informative podcast.
2. *Narratives.* Students share narrative events from their life experiences. (For a complete explanation of carrying out a narrative podcast assignment, see Qaddour 2017.)
3. *Interviews.* Students can interview friends, family members, local experts, or people in their community about their lives or about a specific topic. The interview can be the podcast, or students can create a podcast based on the information they learned from the interview(s).
4. *Structuring a podcast assignment.* For most podcast assignments, you will want to ask students to first prepare a script that you can provide feedback on.
5. *Making podcasts interactive.* After students create their podcasts, ask them to listen to their classmates' podcasts. To make sure that everyone's podcast is listened to, you will probably need to have students work in groups. After listening to their classmates' podcasts, students create questions, and the conversation continues.

#### Analysis questions:

- What is the purpose of the podcast?
- Who is the target audience?
- How does the speaker keep the listeners' attention?
- How do sounds and/or music affect the speaker's message?



**Platforms and apps:** Voice of America has several podcasts for English language learners. These podcasts provide useful opportunities for language learning as well as useful models of podcasts. For advanced language learners, StoryCorps features narrative podcasts from people of diverse backgrounds. Free podcasts can be created at sites such as Podomatic, Anchor, and Podbean. (These sites can be found by searching for their names.) Spectrogram (<https://musiclab.chromeexperiments.com/Spectrogram>) can be used to add sounds to podcasts.

### DMC 5: Websites

A website is a location with one or more pages on the world wide web.

#### Purposes for use in the classroom:

Websites are good for compiling information, whether they are personal websites or a class website. (Websites can serve as a central location for students to post multimodal assignments.)

#### Assignments:

1. *Specific projects.* Students might build a website project over a period of time, such as a semester (Kayser 2002). This website can be used to post a variety of multimodal compositions related to a topic. For instance, students might make a website about endangered species. On that site, they upload a variety of assignments (that can be completed over time) related to the topic, such as posters, podcasts, photo essays, and blog entries. They might also link the compositions on their website to related pages and create a list of useful resources. Students can work on a website project individually, in pairs, or in groups. (For a detailed explanation of building a website as project work, see Kayser 2002.)
2. *Displaying assignments.* Websites can serve as a central location to post DMCs developed during a semester. Students could build a personal website or work together to create and maintain a class website.

#### Analysis questions:

- What is the purpose of the website?
- Who is the target audience?
- How is the website organized?
- Is the information on the website easily accessible?

**Platforms and apps:** Users can build free websites on Wix, Weebly, and Squarespace.

### ASSESSING DMCs

Assessing DMCs might cause apprehension in teachers who are used to assessing traditional print-based assignments (Brooke 2014), and the academic world is still wrestling with questions of how to assess the DMCs of second-language writers (Ware, Kern, and Warschauer 2016). But assessment of DMCs does not need to be too complicated or confusing. As with any assessment, the most important aspect is making sure that it aligns with the objectives of the assignment. For instance, in the section above, “Consider the purpose and goals of your project,” one of the objectives in Table 2 is to learn how to arrange words and images on a page, so “Learned how to arrange words and images on a page” would be one of the items on your rubric. Sorapure (2006) believes that assessment of a multimodal composition should include considering how effectively the modes in a multimodal composition work together. Hafner and Ho (2020) suggest a process-based model of evaluating DMCs that assesses students at different stages of the composition process—planning, drafting, revising, and publication. Some multimodal assignments, such as blogs, might be low-stakes assignments that can be graded as pass/fail. Since DMCs encapsulate a wide range of text types and might have many components, it is important to consider the learning objectives when deciding upon or creating an assessment tool rather than looking for a single template.

## CONCLUSION

In today's world, it is important to be able to write in a variety of contexts for a variety of audiences. Composition is no longer restricted to writing essays, summaries, and responses. There is a need to expand our view of composition and the teaching of it. While traditional literacies are still important skills to be honed in the English language classroom, it is time that we think beyond strictly assigning traditional, print-based compositions. We now have at our fingertips an array of tools and platforms for creating DMCs, and new tools and new ways of creating will continue to emerge. This article is meant to provide an understanding of DMC and to suggest ways to carry out DMC with students. The ideas are not a comprehensive collection of multimodal composing assignments; they are a gateway through which English language teachers can begin to consider multimodality along with concrete ideas for carrying out tasks and assignments.

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